

# **Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1897**

By S. Robert Powell, Ph.D.

The already low wages of the miners in the anthracite fields of northeastern Pennsylvania fell seventeen percent during the mid-1890s after a coal industry slump. Although wages had improved some by the fall of 1897, anthracite coal companies in the region cut wages and consolidated operations within the mines.

In August 1897, the Honey Brook division of the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre Coal Company laid off workers at its strip mines, cut the pay of the remaining employees, and raised fees for workers residing in the area's company towns. The company consolidated its mule stables, forcing teenaged mule drivers to travel much farther each day to pick up their mules (time for which they were not compensated). After inconclusive talks, 25 to 35 teenaged mule drivers struck on August 14, 1897. A scuffle between a supervisor and some drivers led to additional walkouts by strip miners as well as underground coal miners, and by August 16 nearly 2,000 workers were on strike. Nearly all the miners joined the UMW (United Mine Workers) on August 18, and within two days almost all the mines in the region had closed due to the spreading strike.

The first wave of the strike ended on August 23, after the company agreed to pay overtime, bring wages up to the regional average, allow miners to see their own doctors when injured, and no longer force miners to live in company-owned housing.

A second strike began on August 25. Teenaged breaker boys at the A. S. Van Wickle coal breaker in the nearby village of Colerain struck for higher wages as well. When Van Wickle attempted to use Slavic workers as strikebreakers, the Slavs joined the strike instead. Although the strike spread to two other nearby coal works, the company quickly agreed to raise wages up to the regional average and the strike ended on or about August 28.

But when the new pay rates were announced on September 1, only a limited number of workers received raises. The strikes resumed. On September 3, spurred by an incident associated with a strike at the Honey Brook mine, in which a superintendent struck a young boy, 350 angry mine workers from Hazleton marched to each of the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre collieries and shut them down. The mine owners' private armed force, the Coal and Iron Police, proved too few in number to break the strike, so the owners appealed for help from Luzerne County Sheriff James F. Martin.

Martin established a posse of about 100 Irish citizens to prevent any further marches from occurring. Within five days, 8,000 to 10,000 miners were on strike. On September 8, mine owners demanded (if you please) that the sheriff of Schuylkill County arrest several thousand miners who had assembled near Pottsville and had forced a mine to shut down, but the sheriff refused.

The miners wanted a pay raise of 15 cents per employee, the ability to select their own doctor, the right to get paid for work even if the machines they worked were out of order, and the freedom not have to buy from the company store. Workers had already shut down several other mines in the region. Expanding the strike to Lattimer would be a huge victory for the miners because it would

go a long way to shutting down the entire area and forcing the companies to grant workers' demands.

On Friday, September 10, 1897, between three and four hundred unarmed strikers—nearly all of them of Polish, Slovak, Lithuanian, and German-descent Slavs—marched from Harwood, PA to a coal mine owned by Calvin Pardee at the town of Lattimer (north of Hazleton) to support a newly formed United Mine Workers union at the still-open Lattimer mine.

The demonstrators were confronted several times on the road and ordered to disperse by Luzerne County Sheriff James Martin and 78 armed sheriff's deputies, mostly of Irish descent, and coal and iron police.

The deputies, it was reported, had spent most of the morning joking about how many miners they would kill. While on a streetcar headed for Lattimer with the sheriff and his comrades, one deputy was overheard saying "I bet I drop six of them when I get over there."

When the demonstrators (marching in support of higher wages and more equitable working conditions) arrived at Lattimer, Sheriff Martin attempted to grab an American flag out of the hands of the lead marcher. A scuffle ensued, and the police opened fire on the unarmed crowd. Nineteen unarmed, striking, immigrant coal miners, mostly of Polish, Slovak, Lithuanian, and German descent, were shot in the back and killed by a Luzerne County sheriff's posse, and 38 others were wounded.

The nineteen unarmed strikers who were shot and killed by Sheriff James Martin and his deputies were: Sebastian Broztowski, Frank Chreszeski, John Fotta, Andrew Jurecek, George Kulick, Andrew Monikaski, Raphael Rekiewicz, John Tarnowicz, Stanley Zagorski, Michael Cheslock, Adalbert Czaja, Anthony Grekos, Sephen Jurics, Andrew Mieczkowski, Clement Platek, John Skrep, Jacob Tomashontas, Adalbert Ziembba, and Adam Zieminski.

After Sheriff Martin telephoned for help, the Pennsylvania National Guard was dispatched to the county to restore order. The Guard's artillery unit was withdrawn on September 24, and the rest of the troops five days later.

Sheriff Martin and 78 of his deputies were arrested and put on trial. At the trial (which lasted five weeks), state prosecutors brought murder and felonious shooting charges against Luzerne County sheriff James Martin and 78 of his deputies. The defendants claimed that the marchers had refused to obey an order to disperse and were charging toward the sheriff and his deputies. A grand jury indicted the sheriff and 78 others on murder charges, but they were all acquitted at the trial. (Remarkably—and most suspiciously—the court transcripts/records of testimony of the trial were "lost" following the trial.)

The incident drew international outrage, as well it should have, because of the criminal behavior (murder and felonious shooting) of Sheriff Martin and 78 of his deputies who, on September 10, 1897, acting on behalf of corrupt Luzerne County officials, primarily of Irish descent, murdered nineteen Slavic workers (Polish, Slovak, Lithuanian, and German-descent Slavs) who were demonstrating peacefully.

The crossroads where the Lattimer massacre occurred remained unmarked for 80 years. In remembrance of the slain miners, the United Labor Council of Lower Luzerne and Carbon Counties and the AFL-CIO and United Mine Workers of America erected a memorial on the site on September 10, 1972. The memorial includes a monument with a plaque on it on which the names of the 19 killed miners are listed. A shovel and a pickaxe lean against the front of the monument, and a small rail wagon with a pile of anthracite coal sits behind it.

At the top of the plaque on the memorial we read: "LATTIMER MASSACRE / September 10, 1897: It was not a battle because they were not aggressive, nor were they on the defensive because they had no weapons of any kind and were simply shot down like so many worthless objects; Each of the licensed life takers trying to outdo the others in the butchery."

The Lattimer massacre, without doubt, represents the quintessential example of disharmony between labor (the Slavic miners) and management (the Luzerne County mine owners and the Luzerne County elected officials at the time, and Sheriff Martin and his 78 deputies) in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century.

The massacre, not surprisingly, brought together the various immigrant communities within the anthracite region, and within four months of the massacre, over 15,000 anthracite workers joined the United Mine Workers of America. Ironically and tragically, however, with the position/point of view of labor thus strengthened, the door was thus opened to more than a hundred years of difficult labor/management confrontations in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania.

\* \* \* \* \*



The crossroads where the Lattimer massacre occurred remained unmarked for 80 years. The United Labor Council of Lower Luzerne and Carbon Counties and the UMW erected a small memorial on the site September 10, 1972.



The text on the plaque on the monument shown above is shown on the following page.



# LATTIMER MASSACRE

## SEPTEMBER 10, 1897

IT WAS NOT A BATTLE BECAUSE THEY WERE NOT AGGRESSIVE, NOR WERE THEY ON THE DEFENSIVE BECAUSE THEY HAD NO WEAPONS OF ANY KIND AND WERE SIMPLY SHOT DOWN LIKE SO MANY WORTHLESS OBJECTS; EACH OF THE LICENSED LIFE TAKERS TRYING TO OUTDO THE OTHERS IN THE BUTCHERY."

DEDICATED TO THESE UNION BROTHERS  
WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

SEBASTIAN BROZTOWSKI	MICHAEL CHESLOCK
FRANK CHRZESZEWSKI	ADALBERT CZAJA
JOHN FOTTA	ANTHONY GREKOS
ANDREW JUREGEK	STEPHEN JURICS
GEORGE KULICK	ANDREW MIECKOWSKI
ANDREW MONIKASKI	CLEMENT PLATEK
RAPHAEL REKIEWICZ	JOHN SKREP
JOHN TARNOWICZ	JACOB TOMASHONTAS
STANLEY ZAGORSKI	ADALBERT ZIEMBA
	ADAM ZIEMINSKI

SPONSORED BY THE UNITED LABOR COUNCIL OF  
LOWER LUZERNE AND CARBON COUNTIES, AFL-CIO,  
AND UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA.  
THE 10TH DAY OF SEPTEMBER 1972

LERI

On September 10, 1897, miners from Lattimer and Hardwood marched towards the Lattimer mine in a peaceful manner. Luzerne County Sheriff James Martin and his deputies, together with coal and iron police, who claimed that the miners were armed, fired into the group of unarmed strikers marching to the Lattimer Colliery. At least 19 marchers died in the incident, many shot in the back, and 32 were wounded. Virtually all of the dead were Polish, Slovak, or Lithuanian. A grand jury indicted the sheriff and 78 others on murder charges, but they were all acquitted at trial.

